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ABSTRACT

A Wisconsin law has been enacted to ensure adequate educational programming for children with exceptional educational needs. Multidisciplinary teams (M-Team) are mandated to carry out the requirements of this legislation. One function of the M-Team is that of parental consultation. According to the law, parents must be notified that their children are to be referred to such a team. In addition, members of the team must confer with parents after they have met for assessment and programming. This article reviews the preparation of school counselors, their orientation toward child growth and development, and their expertise in facilitating communication. It is suggested that school counselors can be effective parental consultants for the M-Team. (Author)

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School Counselors and the Multidisciplinary Team Process: A Consultant Role

Fredrick A. Schrank

Chapter 89, Laws of 1973 (Subchapter IV, Chapter 115, Wis. Stats.) has been enacted by the Wisconsin Legislature to ensure adequate educational programming for children with exceptional educational needs. Multidisciplinary teams (M-Team) are mandated to carry out the requirements of this legislation.

One function of the M-Team is that of parental consultation. According to the law, parents must be notified that their children are to be referred to such a team. In addition, members of the team must confer with parents after they have met for assessment and programming.

This article reviews the preparation of school counselors, their orientation toward child growth and development, and their expertise in facilitating communication. It is suggested that school counselors can be effective parental consultants for the M-Team.

Mandated in Subchapter IV, Chapter 115, are programs and services for children, ages 3-21, with exceptional educational needs. In general, this law states that school districts must offer public education to every child regardless of any special handicapping condition. In enacting this legislation, the Wisconsin Legislature recognized that many children have not received educational services appropriate to serve their exceptional educational needs. Such recognition has resulted in the formation of rules to ensure identification of these needs and the development and implementation of educational services for children to meet them appropriately.

One dictate of Subchapter IV, Chapter 115 is the formation of local multidisciplinary teams (M-Teams). According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's rules to implement the law, the intent of the M-Teams is to "provide expertise required to assess the learning needs of exceptional children and to recommend any educational programs appropriate to each child's needs." Wisconsin law specifies in section 115.80 (3) (a):

> A multidisciplinary team shall be appointed by the school board and composed of two or more persons who are skilled in assessing exceptional educational needs that a child may have and who are skilled in programming for children with exceptional educational needs. The state superintendent shall determine the method of appointing members to the team and may require that there be additional members. The number and specialties of additional members may depend on the exceptional educational needs which the particular child is believed to have.

Subchapter IV, Chapter 115, also requires that parents *must* be notified when their children are referred for assessing exceptional educational needs. This seems to be a sound requirement. One reason this is so is that parents can provide another resource to the M-Team. This resource is additional communication regarding the pupil from another viewpoint. Rothney (1972) discusses this aspect of parental communication:

> Parents can make contributions that no one else can provide to the information needed about a counselee. They can describe patterns of their child's development; reactions to norms and pressures he has met; frustrations and opportunities he has experienced; persons to who he has shown strong attachment or repulsion; and the models which through imitation and introjection he has adopted [pp. 90-91].

Communication is a crucial part of attempting to meet a child's educational needs, because without the parent's support, a plan to meet the child's needs cannot be effected.

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Parental Consultation and the M-Team Process

One way of tapping this additional resource (parental communication) is through the process of consultation. Consultation, according to Dinkmeyer (1968) is:

> . . . a process by which teachers, parents, principals, and other significant adults in the life of a child communicate about him. The consultation is held at the request of those significant adults who are in need of assistance or information that will increase the effectiveness of their work with a child or group of children . . . . Consultation involves coordinating and exchanging information. Joint planning and collaboration is emphasized in contrast to the superior-inferior relationships of some consultation situations. The purpose of the consultation is to consider all of the available data and formulate decisions about future procedures [pp. 106-107].

This definition, better than any other I know, seems to embody the spirit and intention of the M-Team process as defined by Subchapter IV, Chapter 115. The emphasis is on generating a spirit of cooperation in assembling relevant information on several dimensions—pupil behavior, performance, potential, participation and peer relationships, in such a way that adequate ordering, synthesis and integration of such information can be done. Most importantly, however, this definition carries with it a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating educational programs geared to meet individual needs of pupils.

If members of M-Teams view the idea of prior parental consultation as a valuable resource they will want to give serious thought to who, among their ranks, can most effectively facilitate the necessary communication between home and school. The preparation, orientation and communication skills of school counselors will be examined in the remainder of this article and it will be suggested that counselors be the likely candidates for making parental consultations in those instances where school counselors have become involved in the M-Team process.

Rationale for the School Counselor as the M-Team Consultant

The idea of counselor-parent interaction is not a new one. From its beginnings, the school counseling profession has recognized and stressed the importance of parental contact with regard to educational planning, preparation and advancement.

In the past, counselor-parent interaction has been so successful that many parents are now familiar with the school counselor's role and function and have come to regard the school counselor as an effective helper in their child's development. Because school counselors have already established this type of relationship in many school systems, and because of their training, orientation toward child growth and development, and communication skills, it is believed that the school counselor may be a likely candidate for consulting with parents in those instances where counselors are involved in the M-Team process. The reasons for this belief are:

1. The nature of school counselors' training. School counselors' training makes them an excellent choice to serve as the parental consultant for suspected exceptional educational needs referrals. The curriculum of counselor education programs usually includes coursework in the psychology of human learning and development, mental hygiene and the social sciences. Supervised practica and internships give counselors added experience in planning educational programs with pupils and parents. Counselor preparation also includes experiences leading to the development of certain technical skills, such as methods of personal data collection and utilization, appraisal techniques, counseling, and methods of consulting with parents and teachers. The counselor-in-training also acquires a knowledge of achievement and intelligence testing which may become a part of the M-Team evaluation. Educational coursework includes curriculum planning and adaptation which lends itself well to programming for exceptional needs. Finally, training in counselor education involves an understanding of the educational system and development of skills which enable counselors to discuss the goals of the school with parents.

2. School counselors are specialists in child growth and development. School counselors are oriented toward the continuous growth and development of each pupil. Counselors, whose prime concern is each individual's development, possess a broad understanding of child growth and development. Further, school counselors are hired by the school district to improve the capacity of the school for contributing to the individual's development.

A primary specialty of school counselors is the ability to understand and assess the broad sweep and direction of development, a pupil's year-by-

year growth as an individual and the achievement of a sense of self-worth. Because growth is a continuous process, and because counselors are interested in growth, counselors have an orientation toward the broad sweep of development.

M-Teams are formed to secure adequate educational programming for learning. Learning and general development are so intimately related that a consultant with knowledge of child growth and development principles and an orientation toward an individual's complete development is fundamental to the consultation process and functioning of the M-Team.

3. School counselors' speciality is communication. Probably the most important reason for having school counselors make parental contacts for the M-Team is a logical consequence of their preparation as mentioned above. Because of specialized training, counselors possess skill in facilitating communication. Communication is an important function of school counselors. According to Sanborn (1973):

> . . . the essence of a good school counseling program is a sound communication system whereby information and points of view from various persons in the pupil's life—teachers, parents, administrators, the counselor, the pupil—can be freely given, received, and put to use to enhance pupil self-awareness and self-understanding and to improve the ability of others to respond and plan appropriately for the pupil [p. 7].

Parental consultation is a natural role for school counselors because of their expertise in facilitating communication. Because of this expertise in facilitating communication at all levels, school counselors are a likely choice to make parental consultations for the M-Team.

Conclusion

Wisconsin's comprehensive legislation, Subchapter IV, Chapter 115 (Chapter 89, Laws of 1973), relates to meeting needs of children with exceptional educational needs. Multidisciplinary teams, whose process and function is dictated by section 115.80 (3), carry major responsibility for assessment of exceptional educational needs and programming for children with these needs.

Consultation with parents of a child who is suspected of having an exceptional educational need is one aspect of the M-Team process. Presented in this article is a case for school counselors' involvement in the consultation aspect of the multidisciplinary team process. As stated, it seems reasonable to claim that counselors, by virtue of their professional preparation, knowledge of human growth and development, and communication skills have the background and abilities required to facilitate communication essential to fulfill the aims of the M-Team.

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